

11/23/2009

Meeting Notes: Meeting with Flathead Fat Tires and I-Ride Adventures

In attendance: Marcy Butts, Betty Holder, Moira McKelvey, Ron Komac, Pete Costain (Flathead Fat Tires), Todd Tanner (I-Ride and Grave Creek Cabins)

Betty gave a brief introduction and presented background information about the Galton project and some of the issues involved with the project.

Pete Costain of Flathead Fat Tires asked if there was a good comparison between a motorcycle and a bicycle and why the Forest Service is using historic motorcycle use data in determining where mountain bikes are allowed. Betty explained that the FS has been directed by the Regional Office to use that method for the Wilderness Study Area.

There hasn't been Travel Planning in this area for 30 or 40 years. The Forest needs to plan for the long term. This includes a growing population and the increasing popularity of the sport of mountain biking.

There was much discussion about the new Forest plans on both the Kootenai and the Flathead National Forests and potential effects on the Galton project. The Kootenai expects its new forest plan within the next two years, with the Flathead soon to follow. This can affect the Galton project because of the proposed wilderness and/or wildlands included in both the Kootenai and Flathead Forest plans and the trails that connect the two forests. The Forest Service would not like to establish use in an area, only to have it revoked in the near future when the Forest plan is finalized. Pete was concerned that if the Forest plan was not released in the foreseeable future or was tied up in court that the trails would remain closed without the official land use designations. Betty explained that decisions can always be revised if warranted.

Pete asked if the amount of snowmachine use in the area will preclude the area from wilderness designation. Betty responded that it can make it much more difficult, but MWA is interested in working with other user groups to come up with a solution that works for everybody.

Pete noted that the numbers of mountain bikers in the area is very low and asked why restrictions were necessary. Betty explained that we have very little data to back the mountain bike decisions. The data is needed to prove that the use (or similar use of motorcycles) existed in 1977 when the Ten Lakes area became a Wilderness Study Area. We are still looking for that data and Todd agreed to help contact some people he knows that use motorcycles to see if they have any information that could be helpful.

Pete mentioned that Flathead Fat Tires applies for grants to help maintain and improve some of the trails on the Flathead National Forest. He expressed interest in doing the same on the Kootenai. The downfall to better trails is increased numbers of riders. He described the biking opportunities on the Kootenai as underutilized. Marcy replied that underutilized is relative. Most users of the Kootenai appreciate that it is less crowded than other forests.

Also discussed was the potential for conflict between equestrians and mountain bike riders. Pete said we should look at the Spencer Lake Trail system for a good example of a shared trail. It is on state land. Todd said that he rarely runs into horses on the trail and the encounters have always been cordial.

Pete also mentioned Headwaters Montana's ideas for a lesser degree of wilderness, so-called "wilderness lite" that would allow for the use of mountain bikes in the designated areas.

We dived into looking at some trails and explained that the current strategy is to try to provide a balance of restricted and open trails for the mountain bikes to use. Both Todd and Pete agreed that Mount Marston was important to have available for rides. They agreed that an uphill only option for the Laughing Water Trail was good, and supported both up and down traffic on the Patrick Ridge Trail. We discussed downhill traffic only on the Marston/Dickey Trail. Pete said that this may encourage some more aggressive riders and riding and he advocated leaving the trail open to both up and downhill traffic.

Both Todd and Pete agreed that the Whitefish Divide Trail is a key trail to keep available. It is a good option for a multi-day ride. Marcy explained that although we manage the trail, a good portion of it lies on the Flathead National Forest. We'll have to keep in close contact with them while they are making their land use designations and policies. Pete and Todd brought up the idea of creating a bicycle corridor, essentially an easement, to allow bicycles to continue to use the trail if the surrounding lands should become proposed wilderness. He says he knows of this occurring in other areas and will find some more information on it. Marcy emphasized that this is going to take some collaboration with the Flathead National Forest to keep the trail management consistent.

Trail specifics:

FFT would like to keep access to Trail 311 (Deep Creek) with a possibility of uphill only if a loop was provided, such as Williams.

Also, access to new Ksanka trail. Should an alternative that allowed mountain bikes in the same areas as snowmachines be presented, they also requested access through Therriault Pass. This would help minimize drive time.